



Indiana State Department of Health

Epidemiology Resource Center

Quick Facts

About...Hepatitis C

What is Hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a contagious liver disease caused by the hepatitis C virus (HCV). Hepatitis C infections can be acute or chronic. An acute infection is a short-term illness which occurs in the first 6 months after an exposure to the virus. A chronic infection is a long-term illness that occurs when the virus remains in a person's body. Chronic infections may progress over several years, even decades, and can lead to cirrhosis (liver scarring), liver cancer, and liver failure. It is the most common blood-borne disease in the United States and the leading cause of liver transplantation. It is estimated that 1.8 percent of the population, or more than 4.1 million Americans, have the disease.

In 2009, the most current year of data for Indiana, 22 cases of acute hepatitis C and 6,049 cases of chronic hepatitis C were reported. To see the complete 2009 Report on Hepatitis C, refer to <http://www.in.gov/isdh/files/2009IndianaReportofInfectiousDiseases.pdf>

How is Hepatitis C spread?

HCV is spread primarily by direct contact with human blood and body fluids. HCV is not spread by casual contact, such as touching or sharing eating and drinking utensils. You may have been exposed to HCV if:

- You ever injected street drugs, since the needles and/or other drug “works” used to prepare or inject the drug(s) may have been contaminated with blood.
- You received blood, blood products, or solid organ transplants before 1992 from a donor whose blood contained HCV. (Blood has been screened for HCV since 1992.)
- You ever received long-term kidney dialysis.
- You were ever a health care worker who had frequent contact with blood or had an accidental needle stick injury.
- Your mother had HCV at the time she gave birth to you. During birth, her blood may have gotten into your body.
- You ever shared personal items, such as razors or toothbrushes, with someone who had HCV.
- You ever had sex with someone who had HCV.
- You ever received a tattoo from a noncommercial or unregulated facility that may have used dirty needles or poor sanitary practices.

Who is at risk for Hepatitis C?

- IV drug users
- Health care workers
- People who have multiple sex partners
- Homeless people (risk of potential drug use, poor hygiene, poor nutrition, and unsafe living conditions)
- Military veterans who served in the Vietnam War era and those who have participated in high risk behaviors such as drug use and unsafe tattooing

How do I know if I have Hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is diagnosed through blood tests, and your health care provider may recommend that you be tested for hepatitis C based on your symptoms (if any) and any risk factors you may have.

What are the symptoms of Hepatitis C?

Symptoms may include:

- Jaundice (yellowing of skin or eyes)
- Loss of appetite
- Weight loss
- Nausea and vomiting
- Fever
- Tiredness
- Headache

- Stomach pain
- Dark urine

Symptoms usually appear 2 weeks to 6 months after exposure; however, most people (as many as 80%) experience no symptoms or very mild symptoms. It is important to remember that people without symptoms can still infect others. About 85 percent of people who become infected with HCV will become chronic (long-term) carriers.

How can Hepatitis C be treated?

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has approved treatments including interferon or a combination therapy of ribavarin and interferon as the most current standard of treatment. Your health care provider will decide which treatment options are best for you.

How is Hepatitis C prevented?

While there are several situations under which you can be exposed to the Hepatitis C virus, here are five ways to avoid exposure:

- Don't Do Intravenous Drugs
- Don't Share Toothbrushes
- Don't Share Razors
- Use a Condom
- Use Licensed Tattoo and Piercing Studios

Is there a vaccine for hepatitis C?

Currently, there is no vaccine for hepatitis C. However, if you have hepatitis C, you should be vaccinated against hepatitis A and hepatitis B to prevent those infections.

All information presented is intended for public use. For more information, please visit the following Web sites:

<http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/diseases/hepatitis/c/index.htm>

<http://www.hcvadvocate.org/>

This page was last reviewed 11/30/11